

Parshat Balak 5777

Throughout the repeated attempts by Balak and Bilaam to curse B'nei Yisrael there is no reference to the reaction of our ancestors. It appears they were entirely oblivious of the attempts to cause their downfall. When Amalek attacked, they fought back and prevailed. Here there was no response. The lesson of avoiding being distracted by the agenda of our enemies; but instead concentrating upon our own Divinely granted agenda, held good then. It still holds good for all time. "Ma TovU Oholecha Yaacov mishkanosecho Yisrael". "Keep you homes exemplary and your objectives pure".

Blessing or curse? The words "How good are your tents Yaacov, your dwelling places Yisrael" have the superficial appearance of blessing. Yet we know Bilaam's desire was to deliver a curse. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt'l cites Sanhedrin (105b) to analyse what is going on. Bilaam's intent was to curse Am Yisrael so they should have neither shuls nor educational institutions. "Your homes are so holy and pure; they should contain all your spiritual life. You have no need to look further." This would deny us the ability to create places of worship and raise communal davening to the highest level. It would prevent going outside the home for chinuch; so there would be no opportunity to learn from Rabbeim and friends at Yeshivot and Batei Midrash.

Divine intervention If Bilaam's words would have not have made a difference, why was it important to prevent his intended outcome? Chazal explain that had he delivered a curse, then on subsequent occasions, when our national fortunes went into reverse, the nations of the world would have attributed it to the curse of Bilaam. Rashi emphasises; "We do not want your blessing or your curse." He cites the moshul "We desire neither the honey nor your sting." This underlines the instructions when HaShem tells Bilaam "You may not curse this people for they are blessed."

Understanding the paradox Rabbi Norman Lamm (in a drasha over sixty years ago) looks at Ma TovU's preeminent place in Tefilla. Why have we granted Ma TovU such honour? He answers that it contains an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew.

It is the ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say 'Mah TovU' not *despite* the fact that it was intended to harm us, but *because* of that very fact. It is Jewish to find the good within the evil, the opportunity within the catastrophe, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil intentions of Bilaam (that we should be denied places to daven and places to learn) we mould the blessing of Mah TovU – just as we enter into those very halls of worship. Rabbi Lamm explains the goal of prayer is not to change HaShem but to change ourselves. What sort of change do we seek? The change from evil to good; and from curse to blessing. We want to transform ourselves. Effective davening has an effect on every personality.

Additional interpretation Chazal, on one level, re-interpreted the posuk so the 'Ohaleho' and the 'Mishkanoscho' are treated as references to the very shuls and yeshivas that Bilaam wished to nullify. Study further and you will encounter deeper levels of meaning behind the Divinely imposed formula, which go far beyond the thought processes of the man who first pronounced the words

Rav Shimshon Refoel Hirsch introduces this breath-taking idea on the posuk which follows Mah TovU. "Like brooks are they turned, like gardens by the river." Mah TovU is not "How beautiful!" but "How good!" How very much in accord with the ideal of morality and the true welfare of a people are your houses – be they the transient tents of Yaacov during his wanderings, or the proud permanent dwelling places of Yisrael. Our homes are like brooks which flow with blessing; and gardens which are themselves blessed. Like a brook, each family branch passes down to the next generation all its goodness. And whilst each brook flows independently, all direct their attainments towards the one river they share in common. Each garden owes its abundance of fruit and flowers to the common river.

Place in tefila Bilaam was prevented from using words which reflected his true intent. So why should words, first spoken insincerely, be placed at the forefront of our davening? Such is the brilliant insight of Chazal into the words we express. When we say "Ma TovU" we transform what was said to try to drive us away from the Almighty, into the launch pad for our renewed connection with Hashem through our daily tefilla